



**THE EFFECT OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE ON ACCOUNTING
FRAUD BEHAVIOR WITH ACCOUNTING MORAL AS A
MODERATING VARIABLE IN ACCOUNTING STUDENTS OF THE
FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS
PATTIMURA UNIVERSITY AMBON**

**PENGARUH COGNITIVE DISSONANCE TERHADAP PERILAKU
KECURANGAN AKUNTANSI DENGAN MORAL AKUNTANSI
SEBAGAI VARIABEL MODERASI PADA MAHASISWA AKUNTANSI
FAKULTAS EKONOMI DAN BISNIS
UNIVERSITAS PATTIMURA AMBON**

Rita J D Atarwaman^{1*}, Adelyn Abarua², Frangky Richard Limaheluw³, Wa Pujji⁴

^{1*}Universitas Pattimura, Email: rita.atarwaman72@gmail.com

²Universitas Pattimura, Email: abaruaadelyn@gmail.com

³Universitas Pattimura, Email: limaheluwfrangky17@gmail.com

⁴Universitas Pattimura, Email: wapujji15@gmail.com

*email koresponden: rita.atarwaman72@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62567/micjo.v3i1.2189>

Abstract

Accounting fraud remains a critical ethical issue that threatens the credibility of the accounting profession. This study aims to examine the effect of cognitive dissonance on accounting fraud behavior and to analyze the moderating role of accounting morality in weakening this relationship. The research employs a quantitative approach using Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA). Data were collected from 120 accounting students of the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Pattimura Ambon, selected through purposive sampling. The results indicate that cognitive dissonance has a positive and significant effect on accounting fraud behavior. Furthermore, accounting morality is proven to significantly moderate the relationship by weakening the influence of cognitive dissonance on fraudulent behavior. These findings support Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Moral Development Theory, emphasizing the importance of strengthening ethical education to reduce fraudulent tendencies among future accounting professionals.

Keywords : Cognitive Dissonance, Accounting Fraud Behavior, Accounting Morality, Moderated Regression Analysis, Accounting Students.

Abstrak

Kecurangan akuntansi merupakan permasalahan etika yang serius karena dapat merusak kepercayaan publik terhadap profesi akuntansi. Perilaku tersebut tidak hanya terjadi di dunia kerja, tetapi sering kali



berakar dari kebiasaan tidak jujur yang terbentuk sejak masa pendidikan, khususnya pada mahasiswa akuntansi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji pengaruh cognitive dissonance terhadap perilaku kecurangan akuntansi serta menganalisis peran moral akuntansi sebagai variabel moderasi dalam memperlemah hubungan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan metode Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA). Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terhadap 120 mahasiswa Akuntansi Fakultas Ekonomi dan Bisnis Universitas Pattimura Ambon yang dipilih menggunakan teknik purposive sampling. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa cognitive dissonance berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap perilaku kecurangan akuntansi. Selain itu, moral akuntansi terbukti mampu memoderasi hubungan tersebut dengan arah memperlemah, yang berarti semakin tinggi moral akuntansi mahasiswa, semakin rendah kecenderungan perilaku kecurangan meskipun mengalami tekanan psikologis akibat disonansi kognitif. Temuan ini mendukung Teori Disonansi Kognitif dan Teori Perkembangan Moral, serta menegaskan pentingnya penguatan pendidikan etika dan moral akuntansi sebagai upaya pencegahan kecurangan sejak dini.

Kata Kunci : Cognitive Dissonance, Perilaku Kecurangan Akuntansi, Moral Akuntansi, Moderated Regression Analysis, Mahasiswa Akuntansi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Accounting fraud remains a critical ethical issue that continues to undermine public trust in the accounting profession and the reliability of financial information. Globally, reports from the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE, 2024) indicate that financial and accounting fraud results in substantial economic losses each year, with financial statement manipulation identified as one of the most damaging forms of fraud. In developing countries, including Indonesia, recurring accounting scandals highlight persistent weaknesses in ethical awareness and professional integrity. These conditions demonstrate that accounting fraud is not merely a technical problem, but fundamentally an ethical and behavioral issue.

Prior studies suggest that fraudulent behavior in professional settings often originates from unethical practices formed during academic life. Among accounting students, academic dishonesty—such as cheating during examinations, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and data falsification—remains a prevalent phenomenon. Lawson (2004) argues that students who engage in academic dishonesty are more likely to exhibit unethical behavior in their professional careers. As future accountants, accounting students play a crucial role in shaping the ethical standards of the profession, making early prevention of unethical behavior essential. From a psychological perspective, Cognitive Dissonance Theory proposed by Festinger (1957) provides a relevant framework for explaining unethical behavior. Cognitive dissonance arises when individuals experience psychological discomfort due to inconsistencies between their beliefs, values, and actual behavior. In the context of accounting education, students are generally aware that dishonest behavior violates ethical principles; however, academic pressure, performance expectations, and time constraints may lead them to engage in such behavior. To reduce the resulting discomfort, individuals often rationalize their actions, allowing unethical behavior to appear acceptable and repeatable.

Empirical evidence supports the role of cognitive dissonance in unethical conduct. Pangesti et al. (2023) found that cognitive dissonance significantly influences plagiarism



behavior among accounting students, while Alexopoulos (2021) demonstrated that individuals engaging in unethical acts tend to employ dissonance-reduction strategies to maintain a positive self-image. These findings suggest that cognitive dissonance is not merely a theoretical concept, but a practical psychological mechanism that facilitates fraudulent behavior.

Nevertheless, not all individuals who experience cognitive dissonance ultimately engage in unethical or fraudulent behavior. This variation indicates the presence of internal control mechanisms that influence ethical decision-making. One such mechanism is individual morality, which in this study is conceptualized as accounting morality. Based on Moral Development Theory proposed by Kohlberg (1969), individuals with higher levels of moral reasoning are more likely to uphold ethical principles and resist situational pressures. Accounting morality therefore functions as an internal ethical filter that can restrain the tendency to rationalize unethical behavior.

Previous research has demonstrated that morality can weaken the influence of fraud-inducing factors. Hasanah and Wulandari (2022) found that individual morality moderates the effect of pressure and rationalization on accounting fraud behavior. However, most prior studies focus on external determinants of fraud, such as the fraud triangle, while limited attention has been given to the moderating role of accounting morality in the psychological context of cognitive dissonance, particularly among accounting students.

In addition, empirical research on ethical behavior among accounting students in eastern Indonesia remains scarce. Social, cultural, and academic conditions in this region may differ from those in other areas, potentially influencing students' ethical reasoning and behavioral tendencies. Examining accounting students at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Pattimura Ambon, therefore provides important contextual insights and enriches the existing literature.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the effect of cognitive dissonance on accounting fraud behavior and to analyze the moderating role of accounting morality in weakening this relationship. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of behavioral accounting literature and to provide practical implications for strengthening ethics and moral education in accounting programs to prevent fraudulent behavior at an early stage. Nevertheless, not all individuals who experience cognitive dissonance engage in fraudulent behavior. This variation suggests the presence of internal control mechanisms, particularly accounting morality. Based on Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory (1969), individuals with higher moral reasoning are more likely to resist unethical behavior, even under pressure. Accounting morality may therefore function as a moderating variable that weakens the effect of cognitive dissonance on accounting fraud behavior.

This study seeks to fill the research gap by examining the moderating role of accounting morality in the relationship between cognitive dissonance and accounting fraud behavior among accounting students in eastern Indonesia, a context that has received limited empirical attention.



a. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory, proposed by Festinger (1957), explains the psychological tension that arises when individuals hold conflicting cognitions. To reduce this discomfort, individuals may change their attitudes, justify their behavior, or alter their beliefs. In unethical contexts, dissonance reduction often occurs through rationalization, allowing individuals to engage in wrongdoing without experiencing excessive guilt.

Previous studies have confirmed the role of cognitive dissonance in unethical behavior. Pangesti et al. (2023) found that cognitive dissonance significantly influences plagiarism among accounting students, indicating that dissonance reduction strategies facilitate academic dishonesty.

b. Accounting Fraud Behavior

Accounting fraud behavior in academic research is commonly proxied by academic dishonesty, which includes cheating during exams, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and data falsification (Becker et al., 2006). These behaviors reflect ethical tendencies that may persist into professional practice. Ilona et al. (2021) argue that academic dishonesty among accounting students is a strong predictor of future accounting fraud.

c. Accounting Morality

Accounting morality refers to the ethical reasoning capacity of accounting students in evaluating and responding to moral dilemmas. Based on Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory (1969) and Rest's Four-Component Model (1979), individuals with higher moral reasoning prioritize ethical principles over personal gain or situational pressure. Prior research shows that morality can weaken the influence of fraud-inducing factors such as pressure and rationalization (Hasanah & Wulandari, 2022).

d. Hypothesis Development

H1: Cognitive dissonance has a positive effect on accounting fraud behavior.

H2: Accounting morality moderates the relationship between cognitive dissonance and accounting fraud behavior by weakening the effect.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative causal research design to examine the effect of cognitive dissonance on accounting fraud behavior and the moderating role of accounting morality (Nugraha, 2025). The population consists of undergraduate accounting students at the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Pattimura Ambon, with 120 respondents selected through purposive sampling, limited to students who had completed at least the fifth semester and relevant courses in auditing and accounting ethics. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale. Cognitive dissonance was measured through indicators of psychological discomfort, belief-behavior inconsistency, and rationalization tendencies; accounting fraud behavior was proxied by academic dishonesty; and accounting morality was measured based on levels of moral reasoning derived from Kohlberg's theory. Instrument validity and reliability were confirmed through construct



validity testing and Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding accepted thresholds. Prior to hypothesis testing, classical assumption tests were conducted. Data analysis employed Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA) using mean-centered variables, with hypothesis testing based on t-tests, F-tests, and adjusted R² values.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Prior to hypothesis testing, classical assumption tests were conducted to ensure the appropriateness of the regression model. The results indicate that the data satisfy the assumptions of normality, absence of multicollinearity, and homoskedasticity, confirming that the regression estimates are unbiased and reliable for further analysis.

Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA) was employed to test the proposed hypotheses. The regression results show that cognitive dissonance has a positive and statistically significant effect on accounting fraud behavior, indicating that higher levels of psychological discomfort arising from belief-behavior inconsistency are associated with a greater tendency toward fraudulent behavior. This finding supports Hypothesis

Furthermore, the interaction term between cognitive dissonance and accounting morality is negative and statistically significant, indicating the presence of a moderating effect. The negative sign of the interaction coefficient suggests that accounting morality weakens the relationship between cognitive dissonance and accounting fraud behavior. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported, confirming that accounting morality functions as a buffering variable that reduces the impact of cognitive dissonance on fraudulent behavior.

The overall regression model is statistically significant, and the coefficient of determination indicates that the model explains a meaningful proportion of variance in accounting fraud behavior. This suggests that cognitive dissonance and accounting morality jointly contribute to explaining unethical behavior among accounting students.

The empirical findings demonstrate that cognitive dissonance plays a significant role in increasing accounting fraud behavior among accounting students. This result is consistent with Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), which posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when their actions conflict with internalized values. In academic settings, students who engage in dishonest behavior despite recognizing its unethical nature are likely to rationalize such behavior in order to reduce psychological tension, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeated fraudulent acts.

This finding aligns with prior empirical studies. Pangesti et al. (2023) found that cognitive dissonance significantly influences plagiarism behavior among students, while Alexopoulos (2021) reported that individuals engaging in unethical conduct tend to rely on dissonance-reduction strategies to maintain a positive self-concept. The consistency between the present findings and previous research strengthens the robustness and external validity of the results.

More importantly, this study provides empirical evidence that accounting morality moderates the relationship between cognitive dissonance and accounting fraud behavior. The



negative and significant interaction effect indicates that students with higher levels of accounting morality are less likely to translate psychological discomfort into fraudulent behavior. In other words, strong moral reasoning limits the effectiveness of rationalization as a mechanism for reducing cognitive dissonance.

This finding is theoretically supported by Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, which emphasizes that individuals at higher levels of moral reasoning prioritize ethical principles over situational pressures. When faced with cognitive dissonance, students with strong accounting morality are more likely to resolve the discomfort by refraining from unethical behavior rather than justifying it. This result is consistent with Hasanah and Wulandari (2022), who demonstrated that moral reasoning weakens the influence of fraud-inducing factors on unethical behavior.

From a methodological perspective, the use of Moderated Regression Analysis and mean-centered variables reduces the risk of multicollinearity and ensures that the interaction effect is statistically interpretable. The significance of the interaction term provides strong evidence that accounting morality does not merely act as an independent predictor but functions as a true moderating variable.

Overall, the results highlight the importance of integrating psychological and moral perspectives in explaining accounting fraud behavior. While cognitive dissonance increases the tendency toward fraud, accounting morality serves as an internal ethical control mechanism that mitigates this effect. This interaction-based explanation offers a more nuanced understanding of unethical behavior than models relying solely on direct effects.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides clear empirical evidence that accounting fraud behavior among accounting students is not solely driven by psychological pressure but is critically shaped by the interaction between cognitive dissonance and accounting morality. The findings confirm that cognitive dissonance has a positive and significant effect on accounting fraud behavior, indicating that psychological discomfort arising from belief-behavior inconsistency increases the likelihood of unethical actions through rationalization mechanisms.

The principal novelty of this study lies in positioning accounting morality as a true moderating variable within the cognitive dissonance framework, rather than merely as an independent predictor of ethical behavior. The significant and negative interaction effect demonstrates that accounting morality effectively weakens the influence of cognitive dissonance on accounting fraud behavior. This interaction-based evidence advances behavioral accounting research by showing that moral reasoning functions as an internal ethical control that constrains the rationalization process typically triggered by cognitive dissonance.

Unlike prior studies that predominantly emphasize direct effects or external fraud determinants, this research integrates psychological and moral perspectives to explain unethical behavior more comprehensively. By empirically validating the buffering role of accounting morality, this study extends Cognitive Dissonance Theory into the accounting ethics context



and provides a more nuanced understanding of why individuals facing similar psychological pressures may exhibit different ethical outcomes.

From a contextual standpoint, this study contributes novel empirical evidence from accounting students in eastern Indonesia, a setting that remains underrepresented in behavioral accounting research. This contextual contribution enhances the generalizability and richness of the existing literature by demonstrating that the moderating role of morality holds even in diverse academic and socio-cultural environments.

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of embedding moral reasoning development into accounting education as a preventive strategy against fraudulent behavior. Strengthening accounting morality does not merely reduce unethical behavior directly but, more importantly, limits the psychological justification processes that facilitate fraud under pressure.

In conclusion, this study establishes that the prevention of accounting fraud behavior requires more than addressing psychological pressure alone; it necessitates reinforcing moral reasoning as a moderating force that weakens the behavioral consequences of cognitive dissonance. This interaction-based insight represents the key contribution and originality of the present study and offers a meaningful direction for future research and educational policy in accounting ethics.

5. REFERENCES

- Alexopoulos, C. (2021). Examining cognitive dissonance reduction tactics among individuals engaging in unethical behavior. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(4), 1230–1251.
- Becker, D. A., Connolly, J., & Lentz, P. (2006). Academic dishonesty and student behavior. *Journal of Economic Education*, 24(2), 120–135.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Hasanah, N., & Wulandari, S. (2022). Moral reasoning and accounting fraud behavior. *Journal of Accounting and Finance*, 24(1), 30–42.
- Ilon, D., Zaitul, Z., & Darmayanti, Y. (2021). Academic dishonesty among accounting students. *International Journal of Ethics and Systems*, 37(2), 150–168.
- Kohlberg, L. (1969). Stage and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. *Handbook of Socialization Theory*.
- Pangesti, I., Setiawan, N. A., & Wahyuni, C. (2023). Cognitive dissonance and plagiarism behavior. *Consulenza Journal*, 6(1), 1–10.